NSF PROJECT SUMMARY:
“Racial Polarization and the Criminal Justice System”
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Racial polarization on criminal justice issues constitutes a prescription for increased racial tensions, social unrest and even violence. Public reactions to the Rodney King, Reginald Denny, and O.J. Simpson incidents have illustrated in dramatic fashion that whites and African-Americans perceive two different realities when evaluating the criminal justice system (CJS). During their entire existence in the United States, African-Americans have had fundamentally different experiences with the CJS, suffering through the brutalities of slavery, remaining unprotected from lynchings, and more recently experiencing far more frequent contacts with the CJS, both as accused criminals and as victims. It is, consequently, wholly unsurprising that, by wide margins, blacks see a system that is discriminatory and hostile, while many whites demand more punitive measures to deal with violent crimes perpetrated, in their view, by a violent black underclass.

Unfortunately, the extant research leaves us unable to understand sufficiently this polarization between blacks and whites as they perceive the CJS. Given the long-standing nature of this divide, we make no claims to examine the genesis of the race gap. We do propose to explore, however, far more clearly than the extant literature permits, the precise nature, sources, and consequences of these differing perceptions. We plan to conduct a systematic investigation of black and white views of the CJS, exploring both inter-racial and intra-racial differences. In brief, it is hypothesized that the differences (both inter-, and intra-racial) will be driven, in large measure, by the varying content, as well as the relative weights, assigned to three sets of prior beliefs held by individuals: racial stereotypes, causal theories of crime, and judgments of the fairness of the CJS.

Accordingly, the authors request funds to supplement a research grant from the University of Pittsburgh to conduct a national telephone survey of 500 whites and 500 blacks, carried out by the professional staff at the Survey Research Center at the University of Pittsburgh. In the proposed survey, the authors plan to take full advantage of a relatively new technology in survey research that has been invaluable in “unlocking” racial attitudes, called Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). CATI technology brings together the advantages of the traditional cross-sectional survey (i.e., generalizability) with the advantages of experimental design (i.e., control and internal validity), both of which are essential for unraveling public opinion on racial issues. The chief advantage of the CATI system is the ability to construct a number of survey experiments where respondents are randomly assigned to different treatment (or question wording) groups to determine whether, and under what conditions, respondents evaluate black targets differently from white targets. Because the targets (e.g., criminal suspects, victims, police officers, etc.) in such “discrimination” experiments are described in exactly the same manner in every respect except for their race, we will be in a strong position to determine when race does, and does not, influence people’s attitudes toward crime and punishment.

The results of the study will be published in a series of articles in major journals in the social sciences (including journals in political science, criminal justice, social psychology, and sociology) and in a book-length manuscript tentatively entitled, Racial Polarization in the Criminal Justice System. If funded, the research will contribute to scientific knowledge in a number of important but neglected areas of study. In the first place, the research will add immeasurably to our understanding of the inter- (and intra-) racial differences on criminal justice issues that have fueled so much disaffection, discord and even violence in major American cities. Second, the research will contribute more generally to our understanding of how Americans formulate opinions on criminal justice issues, paying particular attention to three sets of explanatory variables: racial stereotypes, causal theories of crime, and perceptions of the fairness of the CJS. Third, the research will add substantially to our knowledge of inter-racial perceptions (e.g., stereotyping) and inter-group conflict by
examining not only the views of the dominant white majority, but by giving voice to African American opinions on criminal justice issues, as well.